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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004434

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2016

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SUBJECT: DPM SALEH DISCUSSES IRAQ'S CURRENT SITUATION WITH  
U.S. GOVERNOR'S DELEGATION

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador hosted a November 28 dinner for visiting U.S. Governors Corzine (NJ), Huntsman (UT), Kulongoski (OR) and Pataki (NY) with Iraqi DPM Barham Saleh. After an overview by the Ambassador, Saleh gave the governors his views on how Sunnis and Shiites could forge a common vision; Iraq's security problems; Iran's role in the region; U.S. domestic support for Iraq; the effects of Iraq's democracy; and the militia problem. End Summary.

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Ambassador's Overview  
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¶2. (C) The Ambassador began by offering the governors an overview. A small group of Iraqi leaders are now meeting to respond to political and security problems. Violence between Sunnis and Shiites, violence instigated by al-Qaeda, and violence between Shiite militias are currently Iraq's biggest challenges. Iraq is in the midst of building a nation, but there is no common vision for the country. Iraq's Constitution had resolved some problems; other remained unresolved. Iraq must also build new state institutions. All this will take time, the Ambassador cautioned. However, Iraq has entered a new phase, asking for more responsibility over security, which the USG is prepared to give it.

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Toward a New Iraqi Identity  
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¶3. (C) DPM Saleh said this is an important time in Iraq and the region. Iraq and its people -- Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, religious and secular people -- are in search of an identity. Two-thirds of those voting approved Iraq's Constitution, but Iraqis have sectarian identities and need to agree about how to share power. Unfortunately, Sunnis have not been fully bought into the pact yet, although the US is trying to help do this. The ongoing violence is a way of redefining Iraq's traditional power arrangement, i.e., minority Sunnis dominating majority Shia. However, this must be done by instituting something beyond simple majority rule.

¶4. (C) According to Saleh, a new Iraqi identity can be forged between Sunnis and Shiites on the basis of their long common history and culture, and economically, on the basis of the need to cooperate to exploit hydrocarbons.

¶5. (C) Saleh said he had seen a sense of urgency over the last few weeks in most, but not all, Iraqi leaders. However, it is difficult for Iraqi leaders to resolve differences; leaders are relying on the US, especially the Ambassador, to help. The Ambassador noted that Iraqi leaders spoke frankly to him one-on-one, but not frankly with each other. However,

recently, he had hosted a session where leaders finally spoke frankly.

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Security  
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¶16. (C) Improved security is the one thing that could lead to a breakthrough, Saleh said, but Shia are reluctant to give security responsibility to Sunnis, fearing Sunnis would again seek to dominate them. Shiite responded with militias and Shiite-infiltrated police. The GOI is losing credibility because it cannot protect its own people. Part of the answer, the Ambassador added, is to make the unity government a true decision making forum. The Ambassador told the governors he is working with GOI leaders to do this and formulate a program.

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Iran  
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¶17. (C) According to Saleh, Iranians view Iraq as the main arena in which the regional power balance will be resolved and a lever with which to extract concessions from the US. The Ambassador explained that Iran's strategic goal is to become the preeminent regional power, and therefore Iran wants a weak Iraq. The U.S. is seeking to change Iranian and Syrian behavior.

¶18. (C) Saleh warned that Iran's approach is sophisticated. Iran wants an Iraq weakened by "controlled chaos," but not full-blown civil war. Iran also wants the US to leave: Saleh recalled ex-President Rafsanjani had told him the US should not be allowed to get away with removing the head of a

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Moslem country.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador told the governors not to assume Iran's goals are fixed. Iranian ambitions have grown recently, after what they perceive as success in Lebanon; Saleh called Lebanon a watershed event for Iran.

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U.S. Domestic Support  
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¶10. (C) Saleh said the Iranians see an opportunity to use Iraq to influence U.S. politics. as the 1979 hostage crisis had. He said he understands the difficulty of maintaining U.S. public support for the Iraq project, but expressed confidence the U.S. public would realize Iraq was the defining struggle of the time, an "epicenter" bringing together Islam, democracy, terrorism, oil. The USG needs to better explain this to its public, he said, and needs a long term overarching doctrine akin to the Cold War containment policy.

¶11. (C) Saleh suggested that it might help if the U.S. public saw other countries more actively engaged, for example, as envisioned in the International Compact. Ultimately, however, "this is about Iraqi leadership."

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The Shock Waves of a Democratic Iraq  
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¶12. (C) Saleh said all Iraq's neighbors would accept a democratic federal Iraq. The fact that Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, became Iraq's President sent "shock waves" through the region. Saleh said that although he, as a Kurd, would "in my heart" like to see an independent Kurdistan, a democratic Iraq offers Kurds more. Many Kurds recognize this as well, especially when Kurdish politicians brought government benefits to Kurdistan. "Politics is breaking out in Iraq,"

Saleh declared, recalling last year's elections and freewheeling constitutional debates. Iraqis would never again accept a tyrant.

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The Militia Problem  
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¶13. (C) Saleh called Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia (JAM) a serious issue for the PM and Shiite leaders. Saleh and others are urging the PM to be more independent, reminding him he has 150-170 votes in the 275-seat Council of Representatives even without the Sadrists.

¶14. (C) Saleh said the GOI must take on the JAM, otherwise, it would become like Hizbullah in Lebanon. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) do not currently have the capacity to do so. JAM has infiltrated both, but infiltrated the Defense Ministry less than the Interior Ministry. However, it would be bad for the US to fight JAM alone; JAM would come off looking like "freedom fighters."  
Khalilzad